

# Mr. GRAY'S RIVAL

By Eliza Orne White.

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mail was the chief event of the week to the Miss Wyatts because it brought the New York letters. From the time that Mary Wyatt had become Mrs. Ames Forsyth until just before her death, more than thirty years later, there had never been a break in the correspondence save when the sisters were together. At last there had come an anxious Monday evening when no letter reached them, and later a few hurried lines from Mary's son John, with whom she had lived since his wife's death, telling of the illness of his mother, then a telegram saying that all was over, and finally that desolating gap that can never be bridged.

"I suppose you have a letter for me," said Miss Letitia, as Lucy came in with the Monday evening mail.

"It is for Deborah this time."

"That is very strange. It is John's turn to write to me."

Miss Deborah opened her letter and gave an exclamation of surprise.

"I hope there isn't any bad news?" Lucy asked anxiously.

"No. They are all well. John is proposing to bring all the family on to spend the summer with us."

"Upon my word, that's very cool!" exclaimed Miss Letitia. "It is very strange he did not write to me when it is my turn, and I am the oldest," she added.

"I suppose he wrote to me because I am housekeeper. You can answer the letter if you like."

"I have enough letters of my own to answer, thank you. I should think Esther would have the sense to see that it may not be convenient for us to have two grown people and two children and a nurse and baby to spend the summer."

"She has," and Miss Deborah read an extract from the letter.

"Esther tells me we are altogether too big a family now to inflict on you, and as her father's house is not large enough to receive us she proposes our going to Mrs. Homer Newhall's boarding house, but I told her my aunts would feel deeply hurt if we didn't come to them. Of course, if for any reason it is not convenient, you will let us know frankly. I long to have you all see Mary. She's beginning to walk and take notice, and yesterday she electrified me by saying 'papa'."

"John is a perfect fool over that child," Miss Deborah observed. "Mary is thirteen months old, and ought to have said 'papa' weeks ago; Lucy said 'papa' and 'mama' when she was nine months old, and John himself—and boys are not usually so forward as girls—began to talk when he was—"

"For heaven's sake spare us those reminiscences," said Miss Letitia. "What are you going to write to John?"

"Oh, I suppose they will have to come; but what on earth can we do about Mr. Gray? I don't see. Jack and Lily will tease him outrageously, poor creature, and he is used to such a placid life."

"I declare, Deborah, I believe you put the cat's paw before that of your own family. I am used to a placid life, too," Miss Letitia remarked.

"You can protect yourself. If the baby were only a little younger I shouldn't mind so much, but as a child is big enough to walk it is big enough to get into every kind of mischief. Dear, fascinating little thing! I long to see her, but I would rather see her at the distance of Mrs. Newhall's boarding house."

"Then why don't you have the courage of your convictions and say so to John?"

"Letitia!" Lucy cried reproachfully. "You wouldn't have the heart to let them go to a boarding house when we have four spare rooms!"

"We can manage the room well enough," said Miss Deborah. "We can give them the three south rooms opening together."

"So you are planning to have me move out of my room?" Miss Letitia asked.

"Why I thought you could move into mine, and I would take the little room. It would be so much more comfortable for them to have connecting rooms and an open fire."

Miss Deborah had known her sister for more than fifty years, and her faith in the inherent unselfishness of human nature was so great that she could still make a proposition of this kind.

"Letitia would never be happy in any room but her own," said Lucy, who had knocked her head against her sister's limitations too often not to recognize them.

"It's no matter if they don't have connecting rooms. The nurse and the baby can be across the hall."

"I am very sorry about poor dear Mr. Gray," said Miss Deborah, reverting to her pet. "I know that naughty baby will pull his tail and make him very unhappy, and as for Jack and Lily—"

"John is a dear fellow," Miss Letitia interrupted, "but like all men, he is selfish. It never occurs to him to look at things from any point of view but his own."

They were coming, actually coming at last. Miss Deborah had gone to the station to meet them, and Miss Letitia and Lucy were waiting in the parlor, which was gay with a wealth of roses arranged in bowls and vases by Lucy's skillful fingers. It was not often that she was allowed to follow her own taste entirely, even in small things, but the others had been so busy with larger decisions that they had left the cutting and arranging of the flowers to her.

"My dear, you have a real genius for fixing flowers," said Miss Letitia. She always recognized perfection when she saw it, but her praise was given so rarely that her words brought a glow to Lucy's heart.

At last there was a sound of wheels on the gravel, then came a gay laugh and a shrill voice once called out, "Mr. Gray! What an awfully funny name for him. I thought he was a person when Aunt Lucy wrote about him first. Hi! Mr. Gray, you needn't be so scared of me. Hello, Aunt Lucy!" and Jack rushed into the room, closely followed by his sister Lily. Next came John, carrying the baby with patriarchal pride, then Esther, rosy and happy, with a light in her eyes that made the whole world seem a brighter place, and finally the nurse.

"How good it is to be here again!" said John after he had greeted his aunts.

"Let me take Mary," Lucy begged. Having a baby in the house for two long months was a delightful prospect.

Mary looked at her steadily for a moment with blue eyes that had something

of the mystery and unfathomable quality of the sea. Then she put out her hands to go to her aunt Lucy.

"Dear little girl," said Lucy, taking her on her lap and giving her a kiss.

"Lucy, you mustn't kiss the baby; it isn't good for her," Deborah said warningly. "And you hold her as if you thought she was going to break."

"My baby isn't brittle," Esther returned gayly.

Lucy looked at the mother's bright face. "There is such a thing as happiness in the world," she thought.

After the Forsyths had gone to their rooms to get ready for tea Miss Letitia said: "Jack has grown a great deal. He is much more of a boy than he was. I foresee we shall have trouble with him."

To which Miss Deborah replied, "Yes, I am sorry he is so rough. I don't know what we shall do with Mr. Gray."

"It is even worse than I expected," confessed Miss Letitia. "Lily is less quiet, too. I don't know how I am going to stand the noise. I don't know what Esther's nerves are made of. I am thankful I never married."

"I am glad I never did," thank heaven every day of my life that I haven't a husband," declared Miss Deborah.

Lucy said nothing. Was Letitia, who had been the beauty and belle of Eppingham in her youth, really satisfied with her unstimulating life of indolence of body, joined to gentle activity of mind? Was this what it meant to have ceased to be young? Should she herself, in the years to come, learn to be contented with her life of trifles? Would there ever be a time when she would not look with envious eyes at the women who, like Esther, had the fuller life, with its greater cares, but higher happiness? Deborah seemed satisfied, too, but hers was the content of the active woman who fills every hour with loving, if sometimes mistaken, service. They both seemed happy with what they had and to crave nothing more. Was it because they had chosen their own lives, while she had been refused the choice? How strange that this noisy inroad of life from the larger world, that filled her with such a keen sensation of joy, should be merely tolerated by them!

"Lucy, have you seen the cat?" Miss Deborah asked two evenings later.

"No. Didn't you bring him in?"

"Of course I did. I took him out for a little exercise, as usual, and then I chained him up in the yard. I do wish the Simmondses would keep their chickens in the cellar, it would make life so much simpler for us," she said, with the gleam of humor in her eyes that always accompanied an especially preposterous remark.

"Then I brought him in and put in the kitchen, as I always do. And now I can't find him. Children, as Jack and Lily came rushing into the room, 'have you seen Mr. Gray?'"

"I let him out," said Jack.

"You let him out! You naughty boy! He will stay out all night and probably be chewed up by a bigger cat. Oh, my dear, dear Mr. Gray! Jack, didn't you know you were very naughty?"

"He seemed to want to get out awfully," Aunt Deborah. He was meowing like fury. I didn't know it was naughty, truly."

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be a dreary affair without my darling boy. You are worth a dozen baby Marys, do you hear? Lucy can make a fool of herself over that child if she likes, but I am constant to my old friends. Poor dear creature, to have his precious car torn! You can never tell me about the fright and horror of this dreadful night. And I know you have been jealous of baby, dear. What do I care about babies?"

Lucy had heard the news. She went quickly downstairs and arrived in time to hear the greater part of her sister's speech. "If she will only keep on feeling so!" she thought. "Mr. Gray is a perfect dear—for a cat—he is a great deal better than nothing, but the baby is worth a dozen Mr. Grays!"

To steal upstairs to the nursery, to sit on the floor by the hour together with baby Mary, to hand her a spoon of thread or a rattle, merely to have her drop it with laughing glee, in order that her devoted relative might pick it up—to repeat this performance over and over again, was the greatest happiness Lucy had known for years.

"Lucy, you must make a stand, or you will be imposed on!" Miss Deborah informed her a few days later. "Esther is a dear child, but it isn't human nature to take the advantage of a bridge over a stream when you want to go across, even if the bridge is made by the prostrate body of a devoted relative. Esther had much better stay at home and look after her own baby. There is no occasion for her seeing so much of her girl friends, and she and John have surely been married long enough not to need so many tete-a-tete drives."

"But I love to take care of the baby, and Esther knows she is giving me the greatest possible happiness in letting me do it. Nora takes all the responsibility. I am delighted to give Esther a little rest. And as for the drives, just think how many times John and Esther have taken two of us with them. I am sure they are most considerate."

"Oh, I suppose they are considerate as you can expect two such headless young things to be. The modern parent is a profound mystery to me. In my day people knew their place and their duties, and the bigger children looked after the little ones. Many a time I have trundled you about in your baby carriage when I was longing to play 'Hi-py' with Letitia and the other girls."

"It was a shame. I wish mother could have afforded a nursery maid."

That evening as the Wyatts were sitting around their cheerful tea table, their heart shrieks issuing from the baby's room as Esther came out and shut the door, Jack was talking tea with his classmate Ned Simmonds, and it was Nora's evening out. Her evenings out, by the way, were of frequent occurrence, for she was a young thing and needed diversion.

The sisters looked at each other for a moment in silence too shocked for words. At last Miss Letitia said, "Do you suppose she is going to leave that child crying like that?"

"It does not seem possible," said Miss Deborah.

Presently Esther came gayly into the room. She had been playing tennis, and had come home just in time to give the baby her supper and put her to bed. Esther had on her bicycle skirt, and her pretty hair was curling in little rings around her face, while to exercise had given her a color even brighter than usual.

"I'm awfully sorry to be late, Aunt Deborah," she said. "We were having a most exciting tennis match; John and I played against Frances and Ned Simmonds, and we beat them, although we did it by the skin of our teeth. I thought that was doing pretty well for a humdrum pair from New York city. I didn't have time to do my hair or change my dress. I will after tea. Oh, do you mind?" she added, noticing the gathering cloud on the faces of her aunts.

"I am wondering how you can leave that poor child screaming upstairs," Miss Deborah said.

Esther laughed. "It is nothing but temper. She didn't want me to come down stairs; the doctor told me not to humper her," she added, as she helped herself to tomato salad. "If I had stayed with her tonight she would howl like that every evening when we leave her. Poor little soul, it seemed very hardhearted to come off, but she'll get over it in a minute."

Lucy wondered how any mother could take those heart-breaking screams so calmly. Miss Deborah felt indignant, and Miss Letitia was driven nearly frantic by the noise.

"Don't you think somebody had better go upstairs and stop her?" asked Letitia. "I have had a bad headache all day, and although I dare say the discipline of leaving her alone may be good for her, it is just a little hard on me."

"Oh, you poor dear," said Esther, looking regretfully at her salad, "I never thought of that. I'll go right up myself, and she rose hastily."

"Let me go," Lucy entreated. "I have finished my supper."

"Lucy, you haven't eaten enough to keep a bird alive," said Miss Deborah reproachfully. "Let Esther manage her own baby."

Lucy gently pushed Esther back into her seat. "I would like to go to her," she said.

She ran swiftly upstairs. Mary was already crying less violently. If she had the Forsyth temper, she had also inherited the Norris disposition to make the best of things. She was sitting up in her crib and her two dimpled hands were put helplessly up to her rosy face, while the tears stood in her reproachful blue eyes.

"You darling," Lucy cried, catching her up and kissing her with passionate tenderness. "You little dear. Come to Aunt Lucy, come, dear, dear baby, and we'll ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross."

The baby was much pleased with this invitation, and subsequent events proved that she was not too young to learn the lesson of cause and effect. When she was in New York she cried in vain, nobody invaded her solitude, but here it required only a few screams to bring a kind, yet low-toned lady with a gently rustling gown, who took her out of her wretched crib and danced her on her knees, and this friendly Aunt Lucy would stay until she was fairly asleep and it was much more sociable. Then there was one never-to-be-forgotten evening, when the yellow-haired aunt was very tired and the short, stout aunt came upstairs in her place.

"Lucy," Miss Deborah had said, "you are getting perfectly worn out with the vagaries of that imp of a child. John and Esther ought not to have gone out to tea when Nora was out too. No, you shall not get off that sofa; I forbid it. I'll go up to Mary. I can make her behave herself in two minutes."

Lucy looked at the clock and became more and more jealous as the time passed and her sister did not come down. Ten

minutes went by, quarter of an hour, twenty minutes; it was a shame. Baby Mary would get to love Deborah best. People, as well as cats, always did sooner or later, and no wonder, Lucy was obliged to own with a remorseful sigh. There never was a more unselfish, spontaneous, whole-souled woman than her sister Deborah.

Miss Deborah, meanwhile, had upbraided the baby with feelings of exasperation. Of course Lucy had spoiled the child. Lucy always did spoil everybody. If no one had gone up to Mary that first evening no one need ever have gone. Esther had been right, she knew the characteristics of her child better than they did, but the mischief had been done, and now it was for her, Deborah Wyatt, to discipline this small piece of humanity, as she had disciplined the baby's grandmother and her great-aunt Lucy.

"Well, Mary Forsyth," she began, as she entered the nursery. "This is a pretty piece of business! To keep three quiet maiden ladies in a stew like this every evening. Either you howl until your aunt Letitia is ready for the 'Nervine,' or else your poor aunt Lucy, dear, delicate child, has to spend her evening weeping. I am positively ashamed of you. You are a disgrace to the family. Do you hear?"

Baby Mary heard. How much she understood it were difficult to say, but she stopped crying and fastened her blue eyes on the rosy face of her aunt with a fascinated gaze. The next moment she electrified her by saying, "Debbba."

"Oh, the darling child," cried Miss Deborah. "She is trying to say my name, and she hasn't once tried to say Lucy or Letitia. The dear, precious, amusing little monkey! Dear baby, you must go to sleep, but I don't get up to the nursery very often, so first I'll say 'Robert Barnes, fellow fine,' to you, once, only once, remember," and she lifted her out of the crib.

Miss Deborah sat down in the low chair, and, turning up one tiny, soft, pink foot, she patted it vigorously as she repeated the childish classic. When it came to "Here a nail and there a prod!"

"Now, good sir, your horse is shod," she pinched the little foot with a will and tossed it vigorously in the air. Mary was delighted. She laughed uproariously and put out the other little foot invitingly.

"Well, just once more," said Miss Deborah.

At the end of the second performance the baby put out her right foot again.

"You little monkey," said her aunt. "No more positively no more."

Mary looked thoughtful, then she put out her left foot, and, in accents that would have melted a heart of stone, she said, "Debbba."

When Miss Deborah at last went down stairs her face wore the non-committal look of a person who does not wish to be questioned.

"Have you seen the evening paper?" she asked Lucy.

"Letitia had it a moment ago. She has just gone upstairs to get her embroidery. What kept you so long?" Lucy inquired after a moment's silence.

"Was I long?" Miss Deborah demanded with candid innocence. "Mary was a bit restless. It took longer to quiet her than I expected."

It was in vain for Miss Deborah to try to keep her new relations with the baby a secret, for that young person gave the situation away the very next morning. When she was brought downstairs and her aunt Lucy was going to take her, as usual, she shook her head, and, looking past her to the sprightly aunt who was knitting the red stripe of an afghan, she said, "Debbba."

"So you taught her to say your name last night?" Lucy asked, with that stab at the heart with which she was only too familiar.

"I didn't. Honestly I didn't. The witch suddenly said, 'Debbba,' out of the hole cloth. I couldn't have been more startled if the gilt cock on the Brown's stable were to begin to crow. The monkey looks so small, and as if her mind were just a vacant sheet of paper. Say 'Lucy,' dear. That is a much prettier name, 'Lucy,'"

"Debbba."

"No, 'Lucy.'"

"Debbba."

Mary laughed. The Wyatt sense of humor had evidently been transmitted to her.

"You are an ungrateful little wretch. Aunt Lucy is the person who is a slave to you."

"Debbba," and she put out her foot.

"Oh, you want me to say, 'Robert Barnes, fellow fine,' do you? I know a great many names things than that. I am to be manager of a theatre I will at least have a variety in the plays," and taking the baby in her lap Miss Deborah began, "This little pig went to market, this little pig stayed at home," and so on down the line of Mary's fingers.

"I am so glad we came on this summer," Esther confided to her husband a fortnight later. "I was afraid the baby would be too much for your aunts. They were used to the other